

# “Remember”

## A Sermon at Union Chapel

23 July 2006

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### Readings

2 Samuel 7:1–14a  
Mark 6:30–34, 53–56  
Ephesians 2:11–22

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Remember then your former condition, Gentiles as you are by birth, “the uncircumcised” as you are called by those who call themselves “the circumcised” because of a physical rite

You were at that time separate from Christ, excluded from the community of Israel, strangers to God’s covenants, and the promise that goes with them; yours was a world without hope and without God

Ephesians 2:11f.

Well, what sort of house do you live in? Flat? Terrace? Detached? Council? Do you have one? Do you live on the streets? It’s frighteningly easy to think of a whole list of these questions, and – if I just asked someone or other these questions, and got answers, and didn’t get hit for being impertinent – it would be easy to locate that person on the social scale. House snobbery is all around us: carefully tutored by the media and a great deal else besides, we all have the ability to ask these questions, and we all know what to do with the answers when we get them. Though, of course, we don’t ever do this. Or hardly ever. And, whether we do it or not, it’s an ugly concept: a concept which belongs to a world in which people derive

glory, derive respect, from the house that they live in. Something made, literally or metaphorically, by our hands.

House snobbery is, of course, one of the driving forces behind today's Old Testament reading. David is evidently rather proud of his new house, together with cedar panelling. Flashy kitchen. Harp shaped swimming pool. Whatever else. So, he says to Nathan – Nathan, who had a history of telling David unwelcome truths – that surely God's dwelling is not exactly in tune with the times? Well, really, a *tent*? And, then, God speaks to Nathan, with a message that, for the first time in this dialogue, goes beyond house snobbery: a message saying *remember*: remember, that is, the past, when Israel was in the wilderness, and where nobody lived in a house. Remember who I am: remember that I am God and that I cannot be confined in a house (and remember also that the temple was not a house for God, but only a house for the ark – the box with the law in it – or a house for God's name, a house for God's glory). Remember, says God, that I have my glory from myself, and not because of my house or anything made by your hands. Be aware of the divisions and enmity caused by all of this building, all of this reliance on the things made with hands.

Remember, also, says the letter to the church in Ephesus, addressing now the early church, the non-Jewish converts to Christianity: remember, it says, who you were. Remember that you were separated from Israel: separated firstly by circumcision (which the translation calls a "physical rite", but which the Greek, rather more graphically, calls "something done with hands"). Remember that you were separated, secondly, by the rules and regulations of the law: the law which was to have guided Israel to God, but which also had the effect of splitting Israel from the rest of humanity. Remember that you were separated, lastly, from Israel by the enmity between your two peoples.

This is all, of course, frighteningly familiar now, at a time – or so it seems – of unprecedented enmity between the peoples in the Middle East. Dissension about buildings, and not just, of course, about that building in Jerusalem – the one which is claimed variously by the three faiths as the Temple, the Dome of the Rock, and the Church of the Holy Sepulchre. But there is also dissension about houses for people: where people will live, who has a right to live where, who decides who has a right to live where. And there is dissension about other things made (more metaphorically) with hands: about the rules and regulations which divide one group of people from another.

And, of course, we might claim to live by the Bible, to read it attentively, to orient our lives around it; and, some of the time, we do hear God speaking through it. But there is, in all of our traditions, a great deal of stuff

which is there for no good reason, which is part of the insidious collection of snobbery and prejudice and ignorance which divides us from each other.

Jesus is going about with his disciples when he is surrounded by people wanting to hear him: his heart goes out – they are “like sheep without a shepherd”, and he spends some time teaching and healing. Not very spectacular (and made less spectacular because, in the lectionary, the miracle of the feeding of the five thousand has been snipped out and appears elsewhere), but what it shows us is the beginning of a new life: the barriers being broken down, people being taught and being healed, and the crowds flocking to Jesus.

The letter to the Ephesians also speaks of Christ breaking down divisions: of Christ making Gentiles and Jews one, of breaking down the separation between them, in his body: “for he himself is our peace”, as it eloquently says. It’s easy to think of the Temple here (the word translated as “division” here actually means the dividing wall, a piece of temple furniture which divided the Jews from the Gentiles); and that’s, of course, very valid. But what’s also true is that this work of reconciliation started well before the end, before the confrontation with the Jewish authorities, before Jesus took on the might of the law, before his death on the cross and eventual triumph. The whole process of reconciliation started before the assault on the Temple: with the simple works of teaching and healing, with Jesus simply being with his people. It was the beginning of a long, slow, process of building.

There is another image of building at work here: the image of Christ building up the church, as he started to build during his life on earth, and as the Spirit built up the early church after his death. We, too, are being built up into the Church: built up into a “holy temple, a spiritual dwelling for God”. So there is another question to be asked about our houses: are they houses where God lives? Is God present there? Do we make God welcome, not by richness and opulence, but by the peace and reconciliation that we bring about? Is God thus present here, in Union Chapel?

These are high goals, and, it might seem at times, unattainable ones. But the key term here is hope: we must be aware that Jesus has already started this long, slow process of building, we must be aware of his promises that he will complete it. So, we are asked to do two things: to remember – remember where we were, remember what we have come from – but also to hope: to be aware that we are the church, that we are being built and transformed into the holy temple that we should be, and to hope for this slow, sure transformation of our lives. ©Graham White 2006